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## Egyptian Jews: A community in danger of extinction

Egypt had 60,000 Jews before the Arab-Israeli conflict began. Today, only nine remain. Despite the pressure exerted on them, they have chosen to stay in Egypt

Dina Darwish, Friday 5 Dec 2014



Leader of Egyptian Jewish Community Magda Haroun (Photo: Ayman Hafez)

"Maybe I am to write the end of the Jewish community in Egypt. It's sad. It's a destiny which I have to face. Since my early years, I haven't stopped witnessing the departure of my parents, loved ones and friends abroad. I was then incapable of justifying this reality," comments Magda Haroun, 62 year-old doyenne of the Jewish community in Egypt. Haroun's comments come as she is about to prepare the shrouds of some Egyptian Jewish women, who want to die in their homeland, according to their last wish.

At first sight, Magda Haroun is a strong woman who decided to survive despite the disappointments. With a melancholic smile, her alert look and her voice full of assurance, she seems reconciled with herself. The youngest of an old community whose members are all in their eighties, she has taken upon herself to take care of them. Every day, she contacts the women of her community to make sure they don't need anything. At the end of the month, she holds her breath, fearing that the LE9,000 which is the revenue from the properties, are not enough to fulfill life's expenses. A long time ago, the Jewish community was one of the most prosperous in the Middle East. "Our community has 12 synagogues, each with two employees who receive a salary at the end of the month. We help them to pay their medicine fees, especially necessary considering that the LE200 the social solidarity ministry used to give them were suspended over a year ago," says Magda.

Indeed, Magda is one of nine Egyptian Jews who are still alive. This community lived its golden age in the beginning of the 20th century. According to the census that took place in 1947 – one year before the beginning of the Arab-Israeli conflict – there were 64,165 Jews in Egypt. This community contributed to the development of modern Egypt. It is because of big families like Mosseri, Cattaoui, and Soares that the first Egyptian banks (Egyptian Immobile Bank, Egyptian National Bank, Egyptian Commercial Bank) have seen the light. This community has left footprints that cannot be neglected in the domains of fashion, decoration, etc. One must not forget that the Jews were a fundamental pillar of the industry of cinema and that they contributed to the prosperity of cultural life in Egypt in the beginning of the 20th century. However, between 1949 and 1951, around 15,000 to 20,000 Jews left Egypt according to a study called "The Jews in Modern

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***... Magda Haroun who is subjected to foreign pressure to submit the record of Jewish families or documents related to the heritage of the Jews of Egypt which in exchange for financial aid would benefit the community.***

***"But I refuse to do it, because the record and its manuscripts are part of the Egyptian heritage. I will put them at the Library of Alexandria as testimony. It will be the proof that Jews lived on this soil," concludes Haroun.***

Egypt (1914-1951)," done by Gordon Kraemer, researcher in Political Science at the University of Berlin, which mentions that animosity towards the Jews was not a general trend. The proof is that the Egyptian press tried in the 1940s to distinguish between the Jews and the Zionists, and not to fall in the trap of considering all Jews Zionists.

Amir Ramses, director of the movie *Jews of Egypt*, wanted to present the model of cohabitation that existed in Egypt towards the end of the 19th century until mid-20th century. This director confides that the human stories that inspired his work really moved him. "Those people really fought to be able to stay in their country of birth," says Ramses, who faced pressure from security when he was showing the movie, as they were going to ban its broadcast.

"Lawyer and leftist activist Shehata Haroun's daughter, Mona suffered from leukemia, and the doctors advised that she travels to France to get treated. However, the Egyptian authorities told him that if he wanted to save his daughter's life through traveling abroad, it would be without return and with the risk of getting stripped of his Egyptian nationality. All Jews who left Egypt after the tripartite aggression in 1956 were stripped of their Egyptian nationality. And no matter what reason they were leaving for, they did not have the right to go back to Egypt. Shehata Haroun then refused to leave and his daughter died due to the disease," says Amir, who was very touched by the case of Gerard de Botton who left Egypt, when he had 10 years to live and lived all his life dreaming of going back to his country.

As soon as he went to Alexandria for the first time in 2006, he recognized the city by its smell, but everything else had changed.

"The old city stayed engraved in his memory. He left the Egypt he had so loved and carried in his heart," explains Ramses.

Albert Arie, 85, agrees with him; he faced serious problems in travelling abroad. "I converted to Islam after I got out of prison and I got married to a Muslim woman. However, the Egyptian authorities enacted a law that stipulates that every citizen of Jewish confession before May 15 1947 had to keep their religion, something that is against law and religion. They then used this card to annoy me and prevent me from going abroad to pay a visit to my family. It was a baffling problem because every time, I had to request an authorisation to leave, in addition, I waited for a long time to get a passport," says Arie, businessman whose family lives abroad and consists of people from different confessions.

### **Intolerance towards Jews**

In a society that is in turmoil, the tolerance margin has not stopped getting narrower, and the media discourse has mixed politics and religion. Being a Jew was not an easy thing. "Shehata Haroun and Youssef Darwish" were the first in Egypt to found anti-Zionist associations in 1947. Some did not even dare to speak about their confession in order to live in peace.

"We were deprived of learning our own religion at schools. All that I know about my confession is stories and talks that I learned from my mother and my grandmother," adds Magda Haroun.

The Jewish community was also deprived of celebrating its feasts, of animating the Jewish ceremonies, in fear that someone would come and attack them.

"This year, the day of Hebrew new year, coincides with September 25. The Adli synagogue would open its doors, while no one would go to pray," says Magda, while remembering her dad's funeral.

Ester, another Jew, assures that even kosher, halal or feast dishes are not accessible anymore. "A long time ago, there were bakeries that offered azim bread for Jews, bread without yeast, which we eat in Easter. The last bakery which prepared this bread in Mit Ghamr in Daqahliya governorate, closed its doors due to the reduced number of Jews," says Ester, adding that the last communion which she attended was 60 years ago, the *bar-mitsva*, a communion for children who reached puberty age.

Other Jews were victims of real abuse. This was the case of L (name altered for confidentiality), 90, who comes from a big and rich Jewish family. She lived in a villa in an upper class neighborhood. The doorman and his sons who guarded the house forced her to use a good sum of money to buy them an apartment in Cairo and a beach house for holidays. The old woman had to surrender because she did not know anyone else in Egypt.

"Despite the threats that I received from this vermin group, I insisted that she does not return to live with them. Today she lives in a peaceful place," confides Magda Haroun.

### **Even those who converted were not spared**

This is not all. Even the Jews who tried to form a family and converted to Islam or Christianity in order to survive were sometimes victims of their Jewish origins. Movie and television star Basma, whose grandfather was leftist activist Jew, Youssef Darwish, was attacked by a journalist.

“This one has not hesitated to humiliate her because of her origins, telling her that when one has a Jewish grandfather, they must hide it. The prestigious past of my father and his fight for the rights of Egyptian workers did not change things,” says Nawla Darwish, Basma’s mother and a famous feminist who keeps very close ties with her Jewish father who lives in Switzerland and with her cousins from the same confession who live in the United States.

Albert Arie shares the same opinion. “In 1968, a work colleague attempted to file a case against my wife, because he had problems with her. He exploited the fact that she is married to a Jew to pressure her. Fortunately, my wife won the case,” relates Arie.

## A plural Egypt

But for whose benefit does Egypt have to be tinted with just one color, one tendency? Ishak Ibrahim, researcher and expert in religion and freedom of belief at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, asks himself. “In our Oriental societies, the peoples and the state think it is their responsibility to protect the religious identity of citizens, ignoring that this relation between the individual and God is private and only concerns the person themselves. This explains why society gets confused when other religious ideas appear. We cannot assimilate that the other, who does not share the same confession, has the same rights. Hence, we forbid them of practicing their rituals, found their religious institutions, express their opinions through television channels, etc. The question is more critical for Jews, since politics enter in the game,” continues Ibrahim.

However, some think that Jews should not blame Egypt, because at the time, it was a question of national security.

“Nasser took certain severe measures against them, but the political conditions imposed it. We should not forget that some Jews who lived in Egypt were spies. Despite the fact that the 1952 revolution showed good intentions towards Jews – Mohamed Naguib visited the rabbi of the community – some young Jewish Egyptians bombed the American media bureaus in order to disseminate discord between Egypt and Western countries. It was the famous Lavon trial,” explains political expert Ahmed Yehia, Sociology professor at the Suez University.

He continues, saying that even the nationalisation decisions were justified, especially that the Jews had great influence on the Egyptian economy. “It’s something that occurs everywhere in the world. During the Second World War, the United States threw the Americans of Japanese origin in jail.”

But what’s important is people’s lives. This is why the Jews of Egypt kept their silence, and for a long time. Today, it’s the end of a long history. Magda Haroun tries to make it happier. She attempts to clear the satanic image of the Jewish in the Egyptian streets by trying to be integrated more in the Egyptian society. “Last Ramadan, we prepared a feast at the synagogue in Adli street to share iftar with the minorities of Egypt: Bedouins, Amazighs, Copts, etc.,” tells Magda Haroun who is subjected to foreign pressure to submit the record of Jewish families or documents related to the heritage of the Jews of Egypt which in exchange for financial aid would benefit the community.

“But I refuse to do it, because the record and its manuscripts are part of the Egyptian heritage. I will put them at the Library of Alexandria as testimony. It will be the proof that Jews lived on this soil,” concludes Haroun.

\*This article was first published in Ahram Hebdo.

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8

Isaac Salem  
13-12-2014  
12:46am

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**Yes, but....**

Much of this piece is offensive. But some of it is a valiant attempt at acknowledging our joint history. In one respect the piece is patently false in stating "...All Jews who left Egypt after the tripartite aggression in 1956 were stripped of their Egyptian nationality" because for historical reasons not all Jews in Egypt had Egyptian nationality. Many reasons were given/invented to deny it to Jews, even those who were born in Egypt. And their "nationality" (?) was stripped

because they were expelled with a one-way/no return laissez-passer. You could say a condition of their release.... Further when the article states that "... And no matter what reason they were leaving for, they did not have the right to go back to Egypt..." , they couldn't come back because they had been expelled. That was the one and only reason. Justification was that because "some' Jews were " spies" then all Jews were spies. That the Jews of Egypt were expelled is a fact. Another fact: It was Egypt's loss ..

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7

RichardD  
12-12-2014  
04:32pm

6+ 1-

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### A Tragic Consequence

The clearances of Jews throughout the middle east, not just in Egypt. Was a tragic response to Zionist clearances of Palestinians during and after Israel's formation in 1947. If Israel hadn't forced the Palestinians from their homes, the Jewish communities in the middle east would have been left alone. Ethnic cleansing in it's various forms is counter productive to having a modern civilized society, and is something that should be left in the past as a learning experience of what not to do.

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6

Editor

06-12-2014  
05:47pm

14+ 3-



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**There is another point of view**

The associations of Jews form Egypt across the world ask for one thing: to keep alive, without recrimination, the memory of their parents and ancestors in the Egypt they once knew as tolerant and generous. It would be to Egypt's own advantage. Is it really too much to request a copy of the community registers when any ancient Egyptian documents can be freely copied? Mrs Haroun knows full well that we have send financial aid to the community irrespective of her position. However to allow the community registers to rot in the archives of the Biblioteca, without a copy abroad for those who are concerned, will not perpetuate the memory of our community. Far from just switching the light off on our community, Mrs Haroun , will be sealing the stone on its grave.

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5

Yves Fedida

06-12-2014  
05:39pm

12+ 3-



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**A word from "Foreign pressure"**

To whom does the Jewish heritage belong? To those who through sacrifice created it for their descendants, or to the one who will switch off the light on that community? Mrs Haroun's care for the needy and communal property emulates that of Presidents of Jewish Communities throughout the world. Does that empower her to autocratically decide of our Heritage? Communal assets may be under the aegis of the Minister of antiquities, but who ever conferred on her, the right to dispose at will of our religious and civil records- that of the 170000 Jews, who lived in Egypt through the past 2 centuries—which are an exclusive rabbinical court's property? This very identity deprived them of a life in Egypt and Egypt continues to deprive them of a mere copy proof of this identity. Is it not passé or discriminating to dub "foreign pressure" those "welad el balad" requesting a scan, when Muslim and Christian registers are freely copied?

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4

Mahmoud Ibrahim

05-12-2014  
10:34pm

16+ 3-  
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**Regards to mr ArieH**

It my pleasure to know that mr a .arieh is still alive .he was the first one who helped us to export our cotton knitted wear to France 1981 throu 1985 .i had sphinx factory then .it,s afar long time .he was an honest man to deal with. My regards

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3

A. Mirshak

05-12-2014  
10:04pm

18+ 2-  
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**Sad**

This is so sad and depressing. Throughout the centuries, Egyptian Jews made significant contributions to all aspects of life. Most of all though, they always felt a sense of connection and belonging to Egypt as their motherland. No matter what authorities do, history

cannot be erased. Their footsteps and imprints will always remain.

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2

Marianne Reifers

05-12-2014  
09:53pm

21+ 6-



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### We need the Jews

I can understand that Jewish people want to escape from Egypt for they are not welcome und the picture of them in Egypt is not drawn well. They are used as gape goats for the evil and even in films for children the jew is equal to the devil. But as not all Muslims are Egyptians not all Jews are Israeli. There are some Egyptians Jews and I wish with all my heart that they may stay and their children be many like stars on the sky. why do I write this? Look, the Jews are sons and daughters of Ibrahim and they belong to the family of Ibrahim. None can deny this. And the Jews have given great wisdom to the world of which everybody should be thankful. Not you carry the routs but the routs carry you! This I say to Christians as well as to Muslims. We all stand on the sholders of the Jews and together on the shoulders of Ibrahim. Ibrahim was a great believer in Allah. So let us all follow him in peace.

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Laila Murad

07-12-2014  
11:44pm

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6-



**Not all Jews are descendants of Abraham**

You are wrong: Not all Jews are children of Abraham.

There are millions of Jews who converted to Judaism later. Israelites and Ishmaelites are sons of Abraham.

Judaism is a religion, not a race.



1

expat

05-12-2014  
08:40pm

18+

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**9 out of 65000**

thats a full score for the wahabi thinking of islam... how goes the verse, if a stone covers a jew,he should cry to the muslim, here,he is covering.... it seems to work,and the funny thing,1950 this country was lightyears ahead of today altogether

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Ahmed Husni

07-12-2014  
11:47pm



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29-



**Military despotism is the reason, not so-called wahhabism**

the reason of Egyptian backwardness is military rule...which brings tyranny and corruption.

